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# Michael Neu, "Just Liberal Violence: Sweatshops, Torture, War."

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**Michael Neu.** *Just Liberal Violence: Sweatshops, Torture, War.* Rowman & Littlefield 2017. 162 pp. \$105.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781786600646); \$35.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781786600653).

In *Just Liberal Violence*, Michael Neu critiques contemporary defenses of Just Liberal Violence (JLV), which Neu describes as violence committed by liberals ‘in defense of human rights and/or in order to minimize human suffering’ (1). Neu draws a distinction between *direct violence*, physical violence which injures or kills quickly, and *structural violence*, which is a long-term process that deprives people of their basic needs. Neu uses this concept of structural violence to develop a useful analytical framework that exposes numerous deficiencies in moral defenses of JLV. Neu argues that in order for moral defenses of JLV to work, they must lead to the following three reductions: 1) a reduction in violence, 2) a reduction in agency and 3) a reduction of perspective. Neu argues that these three reductions further point to two foundational problems: 1) Analytical Atomism and 2) Moralistic Realism (7). Neu convincingly argues that in all three cases, the defenses fall apart because those who articulate them are attentive only to some consequences of their respective moral prescriptions, but not to others.

Neu examines defenses of sweatshop labour provided by Benjamin Powell and Matt Zwolinski. He argues that they use a reduced perspective on ‘violence’ which excludes non-physical forms of coercion. He maintains that they reduce moral agency as being reactive to an underlying fixed and immutable economic order that is governed by ‘economic laws.’ And finally, Neu contends they use a reduced perspective which is occupied with immediate ‘transactions’ between sweatshop workers and their employees. Due to these reductions, Neu claims that Powell and Zwolinski’s defense of sweatshop labour suffers from the larger foundational problem of Analytical Atomism. He argues that defenders of sweatshop labour ‘[put] forward an argument that defends sweatshops *in abstraction from the political context of their production*’ (26, emphasis added). The second foundational problem which Neu points to is Moralistic Realism. Essentially what Neu suggests ‘is that because we must be realists in the sense that we cannot (for now) tackle the big questions of structural injustice, the only way for us to be moral is to do little things that relieve the poverty of at least *some* people who would otherwise be crawling in the slums’ (36). For this reason, Neu argues that realism is inadvertently promoted. According to Neu, ‘there is no analysis of how those who are taken to be addressable in moral language might themselves be implicated, structurally, in the production of precisely the realist conditions which, at least partly, make the world such a dangerous and difficult place to be (just) in’ (20).

Neu also uses the framework developed earlier to analyze moral defenses of interrogational torture, that is, torture used to extract information. Many defenses of interrogational torture rely on the hypothetical ‘Ticking Time-Bomb Scenario,’ which Neu criticizes for being obscurantist. For moral defenses of torture to work, Neu argues that the ‘the violence of interrogational torture [is reduced] to the singular act of torture itself, rather than seeing this act as necessarily embedded within the wider social structure of a Torturous Society,’ that is, ‘a society in which breaking people by torture were institutionalized, normalized and recognized as a valuable service’ (49). Neu further contends that this perspective reduces moral agency to mere reactivity, by ‘[shrinking] our moral horizon to the question of how to react to a situation of forced choice, instead of asking a set of very different questions about human agency, such as how to transform the ideological landscape that has made it possible for the ticking bomb myth to gain as much traction as it has, and how to prevent this myth from being constantly reimagined and reproduced’ (49). And finally, ‘it reduces perspective by

fabricating a world where evil others are seen to keep turning up, seemingly out of nowhere, instead of engaging in a critical, structural and historically informed analysis of the phenomenon of “terrorism” in an interconnected world’ (49). Neu reasons that these three perspectives point to the larger foundational problem of Analytical Atomism. He writes: ‘not only does the defense of interrogational torture rely on the myth of the ticking bomb scenario to get off the ground; it also configures this scenario as an *isolatable* event in space and time: as if calling for torture *then*, on that particular and exceptional occasion, were otherwise inconsequential’ (50). Furthermore, Neu argues that ‘the apolitical myopia of the interrogational torture defense provides fertile grounds for its moralistic realism: a moral prescription directed – inadvertently or otherwise – to the production and reproduction of a torturous world’ (50).

Finally, Neu uses his model to examine just war theory, whose proponents include Michael Walzer and Jeff McMahan. According to Neu, Walzer and McMahan reduce the violence of war ‘both epistemically (by capturing its horrors almost exclusively in terms of killing) and morally (by being nonchalant about killing with foresight, provided that the killing is unintentional)’ (75). Moreover, he writes that ‘they reduce agency to reactive agency, limiting the object of inquiry to the question of when, and whom, one may justly kill in response to some unjust aggression’ (75). Lastly, he contends that they ‘reduce the perspective taken on the world to one where evil villains are assumed to keep turning up out of nowhere, leaving the virtuous innocent in the deplorable position of needing to be prepared – morally and militarily – to fight back’ (75). The Analytical Atomism of just war theory ‘[treats] the human world as one that consists of analytically disconnectable units that can, moreover, be neatly separated into unjust attackers and just defenders’ (75). Neu considers the use of abstract thought experiments a form ‘epistemic reduction,’ in which ‘the question of moral justifiability is decontextualized and treated in a historical and political vacuum. It is simply not recognized that individuals and political entities in the contemporary world are interconnected in extremely hierarchical global social structures’ (75-76). Moreover, ‘despite this disconnection from the world, however, just war theorists aim to provide prescriptive advice to political actors determining whether or not to engage in warfare.’ By doing this, Neu argues, they fail to challenge a ‘structurally violent world’ (76). As Neu writes, ‘instead of encouraging a sober political and structural analysis, just war theory is designed to enable the virtuous innocent to react to singular instances of physical aggression in a way that is morally just. This is another feature of its realism: that what is judged to be right is always amenable to whatever scenario the world presents one with’ (76). The sixth chapter is also important, as it discusses the role of intellectual complicity. Neu discusses Kazuo Ishiguro’s 2005 novel *Never Let Me Go*. Ishiguro depicts a fictional boarding school, Hailsham, where students are watched closely by the teachers, known as ‘guardians.’ Toward the end of the novel, two students, Kathy and Tommy, confront Miss Emily, another guardian at Hailsham (which no longer exists), who tells them the real reason behind the existence of Hailsham. Neu argues that much like defenders of JLV, Miss Emily also reduced violence because she was ‘blinded to the violence that [was] unfolding right in front of her’ (98).

In summary, Neu makes a convincing case that practices such as sweatshop labour, interrogational torture, and just war theory amount to a form of structural violence. However, in the context of sweatshop labour, numerous complications arise when we start to think about how to actually help workers in the developing world. There is a case to be made that some policy proposals advocated by reformist, pro-capitalist, liberal intellectuals have the potential to do harm, despite their intention to do good. Trade agreements that include provisions that restrict the imports of goods made by sweatshop labour can potentially deprive poor countries of much needed capital investments which are essential for job creation. We should be careful not to demand such protectionist measures that

can greatly harm the long-term well-being of developing countries. Overall, however, Neu provides a very intelligent and thoughtful analysis of Just Liberal Violence.

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